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SPECIAL REPORT

Looking Forward from Dar Es Salaam

Roger W. Nostbakken

Perhaps one of the most poignant and important questions to be asked of the recently concluded VI Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation was raised by an old man in a remote part of Tanzania. "What difference will it make to me, here, a poor man in the bush, that a group of people from all over the world meets for a few days in Dar Es Salaam?"

It is not a question to be brushed aside if the Assembly is to be something more than a gathering of tourists, bishops and ecclesiastical bureaucrats. It is quite in order to ask, "Did anything happen?"; "Will the decisions and proposals have any lasting contribution to make?" The final answer will have to be given years from now. However, it is possible to suggest which issues were addressed in a theologically and practically useful way. There were five areas in which important progress was made.

THE CHURCH AS COMMUNITY

The gathering of Christians from a multitude of cultures and racial backgrounds in a setting of worship, study and debate is itself a tremendously stimulating event. However, there were some significant developments at Dar Es Salaam which signal a better understanding than previously of the nature of the Church as a communion of believers everywhere, regardless of race, culture, age or sex.

The emergence of leadership from the AALA countries (Asia, Africa, Latin America) symbolized by the election of a black African to the LWF Presidency is very significant. Lutheran Christianity has been traditionally dominated by Europe and North America and thereby interpreted and understood from within the cultural parameters of those countries. African and Asian Christianity has a different style. They incorporate into their understanding of the nature of the Church cultural and social perception more Biblical than our own. The Biblical understanding of the Church as a timeless, universal community, comes easily to an African who is raised to think of his ancestors as the "living dead," with whom he is still in contact. Nor do such Christians rationalize their theology as relentlessly and as abstractly as we do. Even the style of conducting meetings will reflect a more relaxed and, one hopes, a more humanized perception of the Church in its institutional expression. This will put its imprint on world Lutheranism.

The question of the relation of the rich and the poor is inescapable in a country which is among the world's poorest. The Church is forced, thereby, to

take account of what Christian community means when so many have so little. We are compelled now to address not only the comfortably detached questions of traditional scholarly theological debate, but the existential question, what does it mean to be neighbour to the poor and suffering? This is a theological question, but one in which the debate will have to produce action. Third World leaders are no longer reticent and shy. They are intelligent, and often theologically sophisticated. We are being called into a challenging dialogue. This too will change the character of our own Christianity to the extent we are willing to be changed.

The voice of women is being heard significantly, perhaps for the first time. These members of the Christian community, traditionally silenced in a patriarchally constituted Church, are beginning to assume positions of authority and power in the Church. The Assembly recognized this by electing more women than ever before to positions on committees and commissions. This too has profound theological significance. Those branches of the Church which continue to refuse to acknowledge the right of women to assume leadership will continue to turn in upon themselves and eventually atrophy. The rightful emergence of women in the structure of the Church in leadership roles is worldwide and marks a new growth of maturity which will not be stopped.

CIVIL AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Meeting on African soil, the Assembly was faced with the question of human rights and the role the Church is to play in this volatile issue. The situation in South Africa presented a clear case of a political regime, confessedly Christian in its aims, systematically and brutally suppressing an entire race. In response to that situation and with the help of the African participants, the Assembly issued a strong statement on human rights. Such statements, while not achieving immediate ends, are of enormous symbolical importance to those actually in the situations. They help to bring the pressure of world moral and ethical opinion to bear.

The "clear case" situation of South Africa also provided opportunity to discuss and address (somewhat tentatively) the question of human rights in Eastern Europe and in other parts of the world. The matter of issuing statements is complicated by concern for the livelihood of delegates and church members from politically sensitive areas. It becomes increasingly clear, however, that the Church as an institution has power both political and social as well as spiritual. It is then incumbent on the Church to exercise that power discriminatingly, judiciously but with insistence, in situations which require it.

The assumption that the Church has no voice in political matters is simply not valid. The question of apartheid in South Africa, for example, is not just a political question. It is also a moral, ethical and religious question which the Church must address with moral authority. Nor is it possible for Canadian Christians to remove themselves from the situation of brothers and sisters in

Christ who now experience persecution, imprisonment and death. This too will affect our life as a Church.

EVANGELISM AS PROCLAMATION AND INVOLVEMENT

Among the important issues raised at the Assembly was a discussion on the nature of evangelism. A good deal of time was spent on this. One heard voices expressing the traditional concept of evangelism as "preaching the Gospel," and calling for a more vigorous and imaginative proclamation. But one also heard a view of evangelism which sees the proclamation of the Gospel as inseparable from human and social development. To many of us who live in comfortable circumstances, such a relationship is not obvious. However, even a brief contact with a different cultural and political setting makes it apparent that concern for physical, political and social well-being cannot be separated from the spiritual needs.

Of significance to North Americans was the call for "re-evangelisation" of nominal Christians. This draws attention to the numbers of lapsed Christians who are baptized, but who do not consciously express their faith in life or action.

Evangelism was seen also as a moral imperative in situations where violations of human rights are taking place. In this respect the Church, with its message of hope in the Gospel, becomes the voice for the voiceless. Evangelism then becomes a way not only of proclaiming hope to the down-trodden, but a message addressed to the rich, the exploiters and the oppressors. Luther once observed that a word which is Gospel to one may be at the same time law to another. The Gospel which promises hope to the oppressed comes as a judgement on the one who oppresses. This is a powerful view of evangelism.

THE NEW NATURE OF MISSIONS

One of the most important facts which Canadians need to take cognizance of is the changing character of our relationship with the so-called "younger" or "mission" churches. Those terms are now outmoded and the churches in Asia, Africa and Latin America wish to be recognized as largely autonomous, indigenous churches having their own leadership. This means we relate to them co-operatively as churches, not patronizingly as "mission fields," nor as children of "mother churches." At the same time we must be sensitive to a continuing need for assistance, both in the form of money and persons. This is the point at which tension arises.

Some years ago, a call for "moratorium" on northern and western aid was called for. The theory was that this would force the dependent churches to become independent. This call was widely misunderstood in northern and western countries, especially among those having little knowledge of the actual situations. It is noteworthy that all LWF member churches have specifically

rejected the concept of moratorium. Rather what is called for is interdependence in order to make self-reliance possible.

Growing out of the concept of interdependence is the realization that interchange can go both ways. Northern and western churches will benefit increasingly from the theology and practice of the AALA churches.

But in order to learn we will have to be prepared to open ourselves to new ideas. The clearest example of this so far has been the influence of the so-called "Liberation Theology" on North America. Regarded with suspicion by many as a kind of communist inspired theological plot to infiltrate theology with the ideas of Marx, liberation theology is, in fact, intended to be a way of expressing the reality of the Gospel in concrete situations. We cannot evade the challenge it brings to our own theology, nor can we help but note the sterility and irrelevance of most of North American theology by comparison. Of concrete significance in this regard was a resolution calling on northern churches to eliminate policies which would give a privileged status to missionaries who work in the poorer countries. This helps to concretize the affirmation that the Church is a fellowship in which each shares with the other.

ECUMENICAL PROGRESS

There was the usual round of ecumenical greetings and the courtesy involvement of guests from other churches in the Assembly sessions. Of particular significance, however, was the greeting of Dr. Heinz Schuette, representing the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. He declared before the Assembly that the Roman Catholic Church is in the process of studying the Augsburg Confession with a view to eventually recognizing it as an ecumenical confession of the Christian faith. This would in effect remove the 450 year old argument between Lutherans and Roman Catholics on points of doctrinal interpretation presently separating the two communions. While this announcement must be received with some caution, it at least signals a significantly changed relationship between Lutherans and Roman Catholics. It also suggests the possibility that Lutheran and Catholic churches would become sister churches, thus healing what Schuette called the "unholy separation" which had taken place at the Reformation.

The flame of the ecumenical torch has cooled in recent years. No one now imagines any significant structural union of major denominations. The visible unity of the Church, however, still remains an objective, albeit in such a modest form as "reconciled diversity." Such reconciliation implies recognition of baptism, mutual recognition of Church ministries and common purpose in witness and service.

There is no doubt that ecumenical conversation will be conducted in the future from strong confessional bases, encouraging a sisterly relation of churches while respecting the particular traditions of those involved. The promise involved in this development is that it will allow for more realistic ecumenical relations than have sometimes characterized the past. No withdrawal of ecumenical relations is anticipated. In fact, the range has been

widened to include global conversation with the Orthodox churches. It is evident, however, that all continuing ecumenical conversation will be open, frank and geared towards practical achievement.

THE CHALLENGE

The above aims are among the most important in which the Church is challenged to conform practice with theology. The Church is called to demonstrate community, not only talk about it. She is also called to make the freedom of the Gospel concrete in societies where human freedom is restricted. Evangelism is envisaged as the proclamation of the Good News in particular situations -- a message of both Law and Gospel. We are asked to transvaluate our old concepts of mission and see ourselves in an equal relationship with other partners in mission.

What will the effect of all these challenges be? It is difficult to know. But it does appear that we are in the early stages of a great transition, a shifting of both political power and theological leadership away from its traditional bases in Europe and North America. We are still the ecclesiastical organization men (and women) *par excellence*. We are still more efficient and pragmatic. But we very much need the stimulation of the theological perspectives of the non-western and non-northern peoples. We are also being forced to take up again Bonhoeffer's question, "What does it mean to be a Christian in *this* world?"



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